EFFECTIVE INSTRUCTION FOR ADOLESCENT STRUGGLING READERS: A Practice Brief

(Center on Instruction)

**MOTIVATION**

Consider the reader who sits down to lunch with a new novel that she has chosen. She becomes so engaged in reading that she loses track of time. After turning the last page, she notices that the sun is setting and her lunch sits untouched beside her. Her reading has motivated her because she is interested in the subject matter and curious about what will happen to the characters as she reads.

Consider another reader who has just brought home a new computer. He is eager to set it up, but the directions are complex, directing him to follow a series of steps to install the programs. Opening the directions, he begins to read carefully and with purpose. He is highly motivated to read well so that he can gather the information needed to set up his computer correctly.

Motivation and engagement make reading enjoyable, increase strategy use during reading, and support comprehension (Guthrie & Wigfield, 2000). It is no surprise that those who enjoy reading, read more, or that reading more improves reading outcomes. Adolescent struggling readers often lack motivation to read. This impairs their comprehension and limits their ability to develop effective reading strategies or to learn from what they read, thus limiting their exposure to important content- area information, world knowledge, and vocabulary (Morgan & Fuchs, 2007). In school settings, they face increasingly difficult reading material and classroom environments that tend to deemphasize the importance of fostering motivation to read (Guthrie & Davis, 2003). Outside of school, struggling students generally do not read for pleasure. They may also avoid potentially embarrassing situations that involve public disclosure of their reading difficulties, such as applying for a job or pursuing a driver’s license.

**The Challenge**

Adolescent struggling readers often lack motivation to read. This impairs their comprehension and limits their ability to develop effective reading strategies or to learn from what they read, thus limiting their exposure to important content-area information, world knowledge, and vocabulary.

**A Suggestion**

Teachers can increase their students’ motivation to read by incorporating several key components into instruction. Increasing students’ reading motivation does not single- handedly improve reading skills, however. Attention to motivating students should occur within the context of a comprehensive reading program in which necessary reading skills and strategies are taught to struggling readers.engage students in reading is an essential feature of adolescent literacy instruction.

**Instructional Practices Associated with Improved Motivation**

In a summary of research on reading motivation, Guthrie and Humenick (2004) identified four critical instructional features that can improve students’ motivation to read: 1) providing content goals for reading, 2) supporting student autonomy, 3) providing interesting texts, and 4) increasing social interactions among students related to reading. Because motivation to read is distinct from more generalized motivations to learn or achieve, in describing strategies to increase motivation we include only those that relate specifically to reading motivation.

Unlike other features of reading instruction, teachers do not provide explicit instruction in reading motivation. Rather, attention to increasing motivation occurs during planning and implementing other reading activities. Many studies have grouped several motivational strategies together since many are interconnected. For example, to increase reading motivation and understanding, teachers might first provide a stimulating hands-on activity, then have cooperative learning groups generate questions related to the activity, and finally have students find answers to their questions by reading relevant texts.

**Provide Content Goals for Reading**

A content goal is a question or purpose for reading. Content goals emphasize the importance of and increase interest in learning from what we read (Guthrie & Humenick, 2004). Teachers can help students find a purpose for reading and foster their curiosity during reading. For example, a student who is reading

to find out how panda bears are becoming extinct is more likely to read text carefully and to employ strategies that will help her understand what she reads so that she can answer her question (Grolnick & Ryan, 1987). Unlike performance goals that emphasize virtues such as completing a task or doing well on a test and may be competitive, content goals are grounded in the attainment of conceptual knowledge. Recommended instructional practices:

• Facilitate the use of relevant background knowledge to increase interest in gaining content mastery.

• Arrange hands-on experiences or other stimulating tasks that lead students to want to find out more by reading.

• Make content goals interesting and relevant by having students read a variety of materials to pursue a theme over a period of time, “publish” a brochure related to a historical event or geographical location, or learn about a topic in order to teach it to someone else.

• Model the behaviors of a curious reader who is rewarded with new knowledge about an interesting topic.

• Involve students in creating content goals and tracking their progress in meeting those goals.

• Give students feedback on their progress in meeting content goals.

**Support Student Autonomy**

When students choose what they read, what activities they engage in related to reading, and with whom they work, their motivation increases, as does the time they spend reading. Recommended instructional practices:

• Provide opportunities for students to choose which text they read by offering a list of appropriate readings. Students who can select their own reading material use more effective reading strategies and perform better on tests of comprehension.

• Give students control over some aspects of the task such as where to work in the classroom, what type of product to produce (e.g., essay or poster), and which subjects to pursue.

• Allow students to select partners, join groups, or work alone.

**Use Interesting Texts**

Students enjoy reading texts that they find interesting and choose to continue reading these texts during free time (Guthrie & Humenick, 2004). Further, people remember interesting information more than information they find uninteresting. High-interest text increases motivation to read. It also increases comprehension and achievement (Guthrie & Humenick, 2004). Several guidelines are helpful for selecting appropriate and interesting material, whether the teacher is choosing for the student or the student is choosing with teacher input:

• Choose texts on topics about which students possess background knowledge. Knowing something about a text’s content makes it more interesting. Of course, school is about learning new things, and students will also have to read texts that present unfamiliar information. The recommendation is not to avoid introducing new material, but rather to be mindful of the importance of motivation and the effect that unfamiliar content can have on students’ engagement. This underscores the importance of giving students ample background knowledge before asking them to read texts that present new information.

• Texts that are visually pleasing and appear readable (that is, texts that students perceive they will be successful at reading) are more interesting and motivating. Pay attention to illustrations, layouts, graphics, and text sizes that are appealing and support text comprehension. As always, texts should be high quality, regardless of their appearance or reading level.

• A text’s relevance and interest is often an individual matter. While some texts are interesting to just about everyone, other texts are interesting only when they support a reader’s content goals. Recall the student who wants to understand the information in the computer manual so that he can set up his computer. This text is relevant and important to him, but may not interest a student who does not share the same content goals.

• To generate interest, provide stimulating tasks related to reading topics prior to reading.

**Increase Opportunities for Students to Collaborate during Reading**

Adolescents are motivated by working together (e.g., Ivey, 1999; Nichols & Miller, 1994). When students can collaborate socially on reading and reading- related tasks, they find the work more motivating and often continue working even after completing the assigned task (Guthrie & Humenick, 2004). Collaboration increases the number of opportunities struggling readers have to respond, and when a struggling reader is grouped with a more capable peer, he is more likely to be successful in the learning task. Similar to the other features of motivation, social interaction not only increases motivation for reading, but also increases understanding of what is read. Recommended instructional practices:

• Allow students to collaborate by reading together, sharing information, and explaining and presenting their knowledge to others during reading and reading-related tasks.

• Teach collaborative group work skills such as appropriate group work behavior, how to provide feedback to group members, and maintaining individual accountability so that students benefit from working together.

• Use collaboration to foster a sense of belonging to the classroom community (Anderman, 1999).